

# Find an **allergist**

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## Allergy Testing: What You Need to Know

### Identifying Your Allergies for Better Health and Relief

Allergies affect more than 50 million people in the United States. Knowing what you are allergic to is a key step in controlling your symptoms. Your allergist may recommend allergy testing if your symptoms include:

- Itchy eyes, nose, and throat
- Nasal congestion or runny nose
- Watery eyes
- Hives, itchiness, or other skin conditions
- Severe reactions after eating certain foods
- Severe reactions to insect stings

When combined with a physical examination and medical history, allergy testing can confirm allergies to pollen, molds, dust mites, animal dander, insect stings, foods, and some medications. With a proper diagnosis, your allergist can develop a personalized treatment plan to help you feel your best.



### Types of Allergy Tests

There are several different types of allergy tests. Your allergist will determine the best test for you based on your symptoms, medical history, and the allergen they suspect is causing your symptoms. Here's a closer look at each allergy test.

#### **SAFETY CHECK**

Testing done by an allergist is safe and effective for adults and children of all ages. The allergen extracts or vaccines used in allergy tests performed by allergists meet U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requirements.

#### **SKIN PRICK TEST**

Skin prick testing is most often the preferred first step in allergy testing. In an allergist's office, a small amount of allergen is placed on the back of your forearm or on your back and then pricked or scratched. Many suspected allergens can be tested at the same time. If you are allergic, you'll experience a little redness, swelling, and itching at the site of the prick test – similar to a mosquito bite.

Results of this test are usually available within 15 minutes, and any remaining discomfort passes shortly thereafter. Keep in mind about



50-60% of all skin prick tests give false positive results, meaning that the test shows positive even though you are not allergic to the allergen being tested. Your allergist likely will advise you to proceed cautiously with exposure to these substances and may advise further testing if your symptoms do not clearly match the test results.

If you have positive results without obvious triggers, further testing can also be considered if a definite diagnosis is needed to guide treatment like lifestyle changes or immunotherapy. It is important to link any allergy testing results with clinical history and symptoms, and to consider other factors that can affect allergy testing. Having a skin condition like hives or a rash, or taking certain medications, also impacts the reliability of skin prick test results.

### Medicines That May Affect Skin Test Results

Because medicines clear out of your system at different rates, you may be asked to stop taking certain medicines for up to 10 days. These include:

- Prescription antihistamines, such as hydroxyzine
- Nonprescription antihistamines, such as loratadine, diphenhydramine, chlorpheniramine, cetirizine and fexofenadine
- Tricyclic antidepressants, such as nortriptyline and desipramine

- Certain heartburn medicines, such as cimetidine and ranitidine
- The asthma medicine omalizumab

## INTRADERMAL TESTS

If the skin tests for allergens like insect venom, penicillin and inhalant allergens are negative, but your allergist still suspects you have allergies, they may recommend intradermal testing. A small amount of allergen is injected under the skin on your arm using a thin needle. After 15 minutes, your allergist will check the injection site for any signs of an allergic reaction.

### The BUZZ on Insect Stings

Stinging insects are responsible for approximately 10% of severe allergic reactions or anaphylaxis cases. At least 40 deaths per year in the United States are attributed to insect sting-induced anaphylaxis. It is often difficult to identify the stinging insect, and it is typical to test for the most common ones (fire ants, honeybees, yellow hornets, yellow jackets, wasps, and white-faced hornets).



## ALLERGY BLOOD TESTS

Your allergist may recommend blood testing if you take a medicine that can interfere with skin testing but cannot be stopped for a few days, or you suffer from a severe skin condition such as eczema or psoriasis. There are two types of allergy blood tests:

- **Total immunoglobulin E (IgE) test:** Measures the total amount of IgE in your blood.
- **Specific IgE test:** Measures the IgE in your blood in response to specific allergens.

Test results are typically available in one to two weeks. While everyone has some IgE in their blood, elevated levels may indicate an allergy. Because allergy blood tests don't indicate the

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severity of an allergy, talk with your allergist about the risk of anaphylaxis; you may need to always carry a supply of emergency epinephrine with you.

## ORAL CHALLENGE TESTS

An oral challenge is the gold standard for determining if you're allergic to a specific food or medication. There are three different kinds of oral challenges designed for patients with a low risk of severe allergic reaction:

- **Double-blind, placebo-controlled food challenge:** You receive increasing doses of the suspected allergen and a placebo (a harmless substance). The allergen and placebo are given separately, either hours apart or on separate days. Because the allergen and the placebo look alike, neither you nor your allergist knows which one you are receiving – hence the term “double-blind.”
- **Single-blind food challenge:** Your allergist knows when you are receiving the allergen, but you do not know if the allergen is or is not in the food you are eating.
- **Open-food challenge:** Both you and your doctor know whether you are receiving an allergen in this type of challenge.

Emergency medication and emergency equipment must be on hand during the oral challenge test. They may also be performed to determine if you've outgrown a food allergy.



## PATCH TESTS

Patch testing is done to see whether a particular substance – such as latex, cosmetics, medicines, fragrances, creams, detergents, hair dyes, metals and resins – is causing you to have a rash called contact dermatitis. Your allergist will apply a small amount of possible allergens

on patches and tape them to the skin on your back. It's not uncommon to have 20 to 30 patches on at once to test for dermatitis. Two to three days later, your allergist will remove the patches; irritated skin at the patch site may mean you have an allergy. Avoidance of any identified allergen(s) is critical to improving and resolving dermatitis.



## UNPROVEN ALLERGY TESTS

There are methods of allergy testing that are not useful, effective or may lead to inaccurate diagnosis and treatment. These include but are not limited to:

- IgG food testing
- Home allergy testing kits
- Hair analysis
- Applied kinesiology
- Rinkel skin titration method

If you aren't sure about a particular test or method, talk with your allergist or primary healthcare provider.

## Home Food Sensitivity Tests Not Recommended

These panels might show reactions to foods you are tolerating without any problem and can cause you to unnecessarily take foods out of your diet – increasing your chance of developing an allergy to a food you were previously tolerating. Additionally, none of the home food sensitivity tests on the market have been evaluated by the FDA.

## Insurance Coverage for Allergy Testing

Current federal legislation requires most insurance companies to cover costs of screening

for allergies. Before scheduling an allergy testing appointment with an allergist, check your insurance policy to ensure you understand your benefits. Ask your insurance carrier:

- Do I need a referral from my primary care provider to see an allergist?
- Does my insurance policy cover patient education or special services for my allergies?
- What allergy testing and medicines does my plan cover?

### Check Your Billing Statement

Skin prick testing is billed based on how many allergens you are tested for – and the number of allergens can range from three to 64. Your allergist might also request an allergy blood test instead of, or in addition to, the skin testing.

### Allergies Change Over Time

With any allergy test, it can be common to test positive for something that isn't a problem for you. Different types of tests – or methods of testing – can indicate different things. For these reasons, it's important to have a conversation with your allergist about how to use your results to avoid allergic reactions in the future.



While there is no medical limitation to the frequency of allergy testing, retesting should rarely be necessary within a three-year period. Exceptions include young children with negative skin tests or older children and adults with

negative skin tests. If you are having persistent or worsening allergy symptoms, retesting may be repeated after one year.

Note: Allergy testing is not performed on the same day as allergy immunotherapy in standard medical practice.

To learn more about allergy management, visit [acaai.org](http://acaai.org).

### Find an allergist. Find relief.

The best way to take control of your allergies is to speak with an [allergist](#). They have specialized training and experience to perform and interpret allergy testing. Once you know what you're allergic to, your allergist can develop a treatment plan to reduce or eliminate your allergy symptoms.

### When should I see an allergist?

See an allergist if you have any of these conditions. Allergists treat two of the nation's most common health problems – allergies and asthma. More than 50 million people in the United States have these allergic diseases. Although symptoms may not always be severe, allergies and asthma are serious and should be treated that way. Many people with these diseases don't realize how much better they can feel. Allergists also treat conditions with similar symptoms, such as non-allergic rhinitis.

### What is an allergist?

An allergist is trained to find the source of your symptoms, treat it and help you feel healthy. Life's too short to struggle with allergies or asthma. An allergist can help you find the answers you're looking for.

After earning a medical degree, the doctor completes a three-year residency training program in either internal medicine or pediatrics. They then finish two or three more years of study in asthma, allergy and immunology. The best way to manage your allergies or asthma is to see an allergist.